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From-ness: The Identity of the Practitioner in the Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This voicing is a self-reflexive response to the following questions which I often find myself pondering: Where is identity located within an intercultural laboratory of performance research? How does one circumnavigate the stereotype in encounters with culturally familiar material? As a performer/researcher of auto-ethnographic performance with a training practice in psycho-physical theatre, I find myself being challenged by specific source materials such as specific songs, images or texts which are associated with specific identity categories. This piece traces that challenge across my work by meditating on songs as identity-associated multisensory cultural material. One particular song, 'Şişeler', which I extensively worked with in the context of 'Judaica Project: A Laboratory of Songwork', leads my discussion.

In intercultural theatre, the actor's cultural identity is no longer the one prescribed by a perfect juxtaposition of national and ethnic boundaries but becomes that which she experiences professionally in her daily work in the training room as well as on stage. In spite of the actor's importance for the artistic process of rethinking theatrical form and content, her role as a cultural border-crosser and her direct contribution to the different styles of intercultural performance have so far been largely underplayed.

(Nascimento 2008: 7)

KEYWORDS

intercultural laboratory
of performance
practice-based research
body
song
identity
belly dance
Turkish music
The Judaica Laboratory
of Songwork

1. 'Astrakan Café (Part 1)', composed by Anouar Brahem, the internationally-acclaimed Tunisian oud player and composer, and performed by the Anouar Brahem trio (2000); Anouar Brahem, oud, Barbaros Erköse, clarinet, and Lassad Hosni, percussion.
2. *Burnunun direği sızlamak* is a Turkish phrase describing a sudden, strong, and uncontrollable reaction one gives to a stimulus by which they are viscerally affected, touched or moved. The metaphor of tingling refers an actual feeling of a reverberation inside one's nose which brings tears.
3. The project 'Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork' (2016–18) is an artistic, practice-based research that explores the act of singing in relation to memory, technique and identity. Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and based at the University of Huddersfield (UK), Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance, it draws together a trio team of 'embodied researchers' (Ben Spatz, United States; Nazlihan Eda Erçin, Turkey; Agnieszka Mendel, Poland) who work with Jewish songs from all over the world — in Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Turkish, Ladino, English, and other languages from eighteen albums of Jewish musical and ethnomusicological recordings selected from the Smithsonian Folkways label. Having different relationships to Jewishness as a cultural, religious and racial identity as well as to whiteness, European-ness, religiosity and other relevant markers, the trio dissects song

Encounter 1: The Oud

In January 2011, during my first training session led by Matthew Glassman at Double Edge Theatre, an international laboratory of contemporary performance, I heard a song. It was a late evening session in a wood-heated barn on a former dairy farm, buried under snow in Ashfield, Western Massachusetts. The room was full of trainees *from* all over the world: Australia, Canada, Chile, Florida, Illinois, Ireland, Puerto Rico, Turkey, Virginia. Matthew neither spoke a word nor gave us any instructions. He moved to the recorded songs of many languages which most of us had never heard, and I, like the other trainees, followed his lead. After about an hour of non-stop training, we were shuffling sideways in a circle when I got dizzy, felt nauseated and was ready to stop and collapse. Then I heard it.¹ It was an utter shock to encounter it in that very place when I was surrounded by complete strangers, thousands of miles away from home, in a physically and emotionally vulnerable situation, as long hours of training would be. The song made 'my nasal septum tingle' (*burnunun direği sızladı*)², as a common Turkish phrase would describe it, and made me almost weep. At that moment, I had this idea that *I was the only one who was hearing and feeling what I was hearing and feeling, and this ineffable personal connection to the song got me up on my feet again and became a vital force to move: from*. It was an instrumental oud-based composition which I did not know before. But when I heard the sound of the oud – deep, low, resonating – I somehow *knew* it. I knew where it was *from* (and when I use the word 'from', here, I mean that I felt its *fromness* the same way I do when I say where *I am from*) – not from a country, a nation, or a specific citizenship, but rather, a more embedded and embodied way of being *from*.

Encounter 2: Şişeler

In the summer of 2017, the Judaica trio³ – Ben Spatz, Agnieszka Mendel and myself – immersed ourselves in a laboratory setting for four months and explored a wide collection of songs affiliated with Jewish cultures across time and place. All three of us brought our personal, cultural and political urgencies into the studio space to grapple with the question: What knowledge is embedded and embodied in a song? Not sharing a common Jewish upbringing, each of us entered the space with what was familiar to us, socially, linguistically or ritually. In the Judaica Laboratory, a song, like speech, a gesture, a book or a segment of a choreography, created a frame for each practitioner to re-encounter culturally specific associations, and then to follow these threads of associations into some kind of sonic, somatic or theatrical manifestation.⁴

I was having dinner with my Turkish friends at my house in Exeter and they proposed listening to the songs I was about to learn for the Judaica Project. I had access to the archive of songs prior to the lab process to listen and choose some to start working with. When 'Şişeler' started to play, it indeed felt very familiar as any song does in the 9/8 rhythm of Turkish, Romani or Balkan music played with the *darbuka* (goblet drum), *zil* (hand percussion bells), accordion and others. As we listened and ate, we kept gently sliding our heads from side to side to accommodate its rhythm until one of us asked: 'Isn't this Şişeler?' Though it was very familiar, I did not recognize it, neither phonetically (from the lyrics) nor visually (from the title), until someone pointed it out. The Feenjon Group, a New York City-based folk-rock band, formed in the

1960s by musicians with Greek and Arab roots, sang this version in Turkish with an accent, and the name of the song, 'Şişeler' – transliterated as it is heard in English – became 'Shishelai' (Feenjon Group 1968).

How did 'Şişeler'/'Shishelai' end up in the Jewish music collection of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings?

How can I extract any knowledge of 'Jewishness' through a song which is so familiar, mundane, and 'Turkish' to me?

(I kept asking myself)

'Şişeler' is a very popular Turkish folk song with numerous reinterpretations of it, old and current, as pop, folk, *tavern* and even as classical Turkish music (*musiki*). In order to find a Jewish connection with the song, I traced it on a world map and realized how it had travelled outside the borders of Turkey and borders of music styles beyond my imagination.⁵ The song is said to be from Kilis, a historical town in south-eastern Turkey, neighbouring Syria (Muhtar 2014), which has been a bridge between different ethnicities, religions and civilizations over centuries. Nurettin Çamlıdağ (1922–97), the Turkish folk

as history, song as experience, song as action, song as document, song as knowledge. For more information, please visit: www.urbanresearchtheater.com.

4. To see the examples of the work of each practitioner with the songs, please visit the 'Songwork Catalogue II' at www.urbanresearchtheater.com which consists of uncut and unedited short clips of the lab practice.

5. Turkish Classical (*Musiki*): 'Lingo Lingo Şişeler' by Zeki Müren, Istanbul (1950–65) available online via 'Raif Kara Gramophone and Record Collection', Istanbul, Turkey.

Folk-Rock Fusion: John Berberian, (1964), 'Şişeler', *Expressions East*, New York: Mainstream Records.

Rock: Devil's Anvil (1967), 'Shishelai', *Hard Rock from the Middle East*, New York: Columbia Records.

Folk: The Feenjon Group (1968), 'Shishelai', *Belly Dancing at The Cafe Feenjon*, New York: Smithsonian Folkway Recordings.

Turkish Folk Rock: Kim Bunlar (TV comedy show and Band) (1998), 'Dişeler', İstanbul.

Pop Rock: Ömer Faruk Tekbilek 'Siseler', *Beyond the Sky* (1992, Germany), *Gypsy Fire* (1995, US), *The Sound of Istanbul* (2011, Turkey).



Figure 1: The first day in the Judaica Lab singing 'Şişeler'. The practitioner: N. Eda Erçin, the videographer: Agnieszka Mendel. 2017. Video screenshot. University of Huddersfield. © The Judaica Project Archive.



Figure 2: The Feenjon Group, *Belly Dancing at the Café Feenjon*, album cover, 1968. © Smithsonian Records.

6. As an example of one of these reproductions, see the official music video of 'Lingo Lingo Di Deler' by İstanbul Girls Orchestra, Fa Müzik Yapım, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJjt9bhiWxs>

musician and radio artist of the National Radio and Television Corporation of Turkey (TRT) is listed as the compiler of 'Şişeler' on one of the oldest album recordings of the song, performed by Zeki Müren (1950–65), the nationally-acclaimed Turkish Classical Music (*musiki*) performer. Even though this particular version places the song among archival and iconic Turkish folk songs, its everlasting popularity comes from the pop and even kitsch reinterpretations of it which reproduce stereotypes of belly dancing and the 'orientalised' female belly dancer image.⁶

Encounter 3: First day in the Judaica laboratory

Move freely

Move the way you're inspired to do

Just keep moving no matter what

Jump, kneel, clap as you sing

Do whatever you want

But do not belly dance.

Not here, not today.

(speaking to myself in the lab)

I was the last practitioner of the first day. For the first hour and half, I filmed the session in which Ben began as the practitioner and Agnieszka directed him. In the second session, I directed Agnieszka and Ben filmed. In the last ninety-minute slot, I was at the centre of the space with the first song I brought into the studio, 'Şişeler'. Ben gave me space and time to find my way with the

song without giving me immediate instructions. I knelt and sang it plainly, much slower than the original tempo. After only ten minutes I already found myself out of breath and out of possibilities. As I tried new ways of 'entry' to the song, I began to enact a belly dance routine and the moment I realised it, I dropped it. Ben saw a different quality of engagement, of liveliness perhaps, in my work when I was in a semi-belly dancing mode and he asked me to follow that association, to take it to its limits. I resisted – because belly dancing to 'Şişeler' was a natural impulse to me. In any other context, when I heard the song, I would start moving. I would perform finger snaps, head slides, or hip drops almost automatically. But then I would not know where to go with this 'belly dance' as I was determined to find something else in the song, something unknown, undiscovered, something more 'serious' or 'significant'. Both as a way of breaking my habit (as a performer) and as a response to the ways the song has been culturally appropriated through cheap reproductions of the belly dancing image (as the only Middle Eastern in the lab), I gave myself a challenge: '*Do anything but belly dance*'. Instead of dancing to the song, I found ways of defamiliarizing myself with it through other ways of engaging such as verbal, dialogical, or somatic engagement.⁷

'Şişeler' means 'bottles', referring to bottles of *rakı*, the anise-flavoured, grape-based national alcohol of Turkey. The song recalls drinking, belly dancing and a love affair. In line with its catchy melody and rhythm, it connotes a type of 'lightness' as its lyrics do not project pain, loss or sorrow in the way those emotions are expressed in most folk songs. Instead it has a fragmented and conversational tone with iterations of non-lexical utterances or exclamations such as *lingo lingo*, *oh*, or *aman*, which affords a lot of playfulness for the practitioner. I distorted the song, playing with those rigmarole words. But then I didn't know where to go with this 'play' as I again strived to find something else in the song, something unknown, undiscovered, something more 'serious' or 'significant'. I found myself being limited by my pre-judgement of what the song was and what it could do. I needed an opening to break though the blockage which at the time I defined as being identity-related.

In the lab, we did not play the recorded songs out loud. It was meant to be a fresh moment of re-encounter when the practitioner brought the song into a new session. As I refrained myself from dancing to 'Şişeler', I gradually stopped singing it. On the one hand, I was thrilled by what technical and creative possibilities came out of the limitation I set for myself. Yet, on the other hand, the song as I knew it began to dissolve and disappear. There was no way of retrieving the palpable sensation of it that used to make me want to dance. Each time I tried to bring that aspect back, I could not help seeing myself representing an idea of belly dancing or an image of the female belly dancer instead of a performer experimenting with a song.

Encounter 4: Headphones

Something unexpected unfolded in the tenth week of the Judaica lab:

The headphones. I put them on and immediately, I mean, really immediately, the song moves me: literally. I start running around the studio. Doing all sorts of foot moves, steps, in and out, at times probably looking like a sort of broken belly dance. I felt extremely energized. At that moment, there was no question of 'how can I go on'; there was no question of 'shall I stop' or 'what do I do next.' I don't even care about the camera, which is rare. So, I move. I dance.

7. You can look at the following videos from the 'Songwork Catalogue II' at <https://urbanresearchtheater.com/songwork/> to see the examples of my verbal, dialogical and somatic engagement with the song as a result of my refrain from belly dance:

Verbal: 'emerging character types' (3:48) with a commentary, <https://urbanresearchtheater.com/2017/05/03/following-a-word/>

Dialogical: 'conversation through song' (2:58), <https://urbanresearchtheater.com/2017/05/10/conversation-through-song/>

Somatic: 'threading impulses into the song' (4:00), with the commentary of the Judaica trio, <https://urbanresearchtheater.com/2017/06/02/threading-impulses-into-the-song/>



Figure 3: The Judaica Lab Week 10, the practitioner: N. Eda Erçin, the videographer: Agnieszka Mendel. 2017. Video screenshot. University of Huddersfield. © The Judaica Project Archive.

I dance. I dance on the floor, up on my feet. The song is on loop. The end of the song each time, I take a deep breath. It's almost like the end of some sort of a journey and I wait. I wait for the song to restart, to restart me. In between, I am just exhausted. Identity is exhaustion. Identity is exhausting. I am exhausted by engaging with what identity presents for me in the studio today...

(I spoke to a voice recorder right after the lab work when everybody left and I was alone in the studio.)

Starting from the second month of the lab, we occasionally brought in wireless headphones in the space to experiment. It was one of methods we used to re-encounter a song in an unpredictable way. The practitioner put the headphones on and the director chose which songs for how long and in what volume to play. On this particular day in the tenth week, as I reflected above, something extraordinary happened. The headphones allowed me to create a space within the space where I could receive and respond to 'Şişeler' spontaneously and nonjudgmentally in a way I had never done before. I belly danced to the song up to my complete exhaustion which transformed the way I felt both about the song and my engagement with it. Up until that point, I worked with it in numerous ways but mostly avoiding singing it (in the original upbeat version) and dancing to it. In order to escape from engaging with 'Şişeler' in a representational manner, I always dismantled it and worked with it in pieces such as words, rhythms or somatic impulses. With the headphones, I closed my eyes and could just follow the song as a whole with the instruments, singers, and the whole environment it was associated with. The representational turned into something urgent and flowing. It was absolutely not the same kind of connection I had with the song when I heard it in my house with my Turkish friends around. The song still energized us, made us sing along, and

dance, but not in the same vibrant and empowering way as I experienced in the studio. At that moment, I had this idea that *I was the only one who was hearing and feeling what I was hearing and feeling, and this ineffable personal connection to the song got me up on my feet again and became a vital force to move from*. What is even more intriguing was the fact I was literally the only one to 'hear' it this time with the headphones on.

The identity of the practitioner in the laboratory is contested, inventive and inconsistent. The practitioner (consciously or unconsciously) is always already in a process of reassessing what she represents in her action. What I am specifically interested in here are the moments when the representational dissolves into something coming from 'inside', something uncontrollably responsive, as in responding and feeling responsible for. It is neither arbitrary nor ordinary. I usually experience it as frantic and mostly reactionary. It is reified within the act of doing something together in a particular group in a designated place. Even within the walls of the sterile enclosed studio space, the identity is constantly recalled as a force to move through/around/by and from. It is contested because the practitioner constantly negotiates with grand cultural categories of being, becoming and *from-ness* in her action. It is inventive because the practitioner creates and blends bodily techniques and methods to circumnavigate the stereotypes and go beyond the representational. It is also inconsistent because it carries traces of intersecting and disparate geographies one identifies with: geographies of birth, growth, travel, trauma and exile. The identity in the laboratory is never one fixed category but a relational unfolding practice.

Perhaps instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalising world to speak of identification, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged. There is little chance that the tensions, confrontations and conflicts that activity generates would subside.

(Bauman 2001: 129).

Encounter 5: Back home

I have just arrived in Istanbul from Manchester for a short visit, taking a few days off from Judaica for one of my best friends' wedding. The neighbourhood I grew up in has changed drastically in the last ten years. The small square in between houses, which resembles the Greek agora and once was surrounded by only traditional coffee houses for men, now hosts numerous independent cafés, bars, meyhanes with live music for everyone. It's about 2 in the morning and it sounds like people, women and men, have just started to have fun. Despite the loud high beat mixture of Turkish classical, folk and arabesk, I am falling asleep. As my eyelids roll over, it interrupts. A song which wakes me up. The moment I hear it, I get out of the bed, go out to the balcony in my pyjamas to hear it clearly. It is 'Şişeler', the song I have been singing and exploring day and night for the last three weeks in the laboratory. If it was a month ago, I would not pay attention to it. It would be just another song in the night. But now, I have questions about it. What is it that I am missing in it? What is in it that no one hears but perhaps I can? Where did 'Şişeler' come to the laboratory? Is 'Şişeler' a Jewish song in one sense? As I am taking these notes in my ethnographer mind, I find myself gently sliding my head side to side to accompany its rhythm. 2 am, in the balcony,

surrounded by my great aunt's pots of flame-red geranium. I go inside, leave the door half-open, to keep listening to it as I fall asleep.

(Erçin, personal journal, 17 May 2017, Maltepe, İstanbul)

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